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ARTS EDUCATION

Growing up Grandstreet

"Creativity is a straight shot to innovation"

By Jill Roberts

Jill Roberts grew up in Helena, where she was a student at Grandstreet Theatre School. She recently moved back to Helena after a successful career in theatre and the restaurant industry to open a new downtown business.

Jill recently spoke before a legislative committee about how her early education in the arts set the stage for her later career success. A version of her testimony is reprinted here:

I am a product of one of Helena's most valuable resources: Grandstreet Theatre.

I moved back to Helena in July 2014 after spending 16 years in New York City and 10 years in Chicago. After graduating on a full scholarship with honors from the musical theatre conservatory at Roosevelt University, Chicago was my home base as I traveled around the country performing in regional theatres and with national tours.

At a certain point I outgrew Chicago and moved to the Big Apple, where I continued to make a living on the stage. Between gigs, I fed my other passion, food and wine, and when I finally tired of my life as a theatre gypsy, that world welcomed me with open arms.

I received my certification at the American Sommelier Association and had a successful career as a wine sommelier, running acclaimed wine programs at some of the city's top restaurants. I received national praise for my work with Moët-Hennessy, and was honored to be a repeat guest on the *New York Times* tasting panel "Wines of the Times."

I can honestly say that my experience during my formative years at Grandstreet Theatre groomed me for success. Grandstreet gave me the tools not only to face the challenges of the big, bad and wonderful world; but also to get out and embrace it with open eyes, an open heart and an appreciation for the journey.



Grandstreet Theatre School students perform in "Annie." (Photo by Jeff Downing)

When I started my involvement with Grandstreet as a child, the theatre was run by Janet and Don McLaughlin. Janet taught me how to sing to the back of the balcony and to "shuffle off to buffalo," and she also instilled in me the mantra, "If you are not 10 minutes early, you are late."

Don introduced me to all of the stock characters of the commedia dell'arte, and also taught me how to create a lighting plot. Those of us who put in extra hours in the shop would be invited to a Japanese sukiyaki dinner prepared by Don himself.

We were rewarded for hard work. Our instructors at Grandstreet Theatre School always made it clear to us that we were not there just to have fun. We were taught early on to be prepared. You got the part because you worked the hardest, not just because you were the most talented. Standards were high.

Grandstreet is (to this day) a serious theatre producing work of high production value. If you were too tall to be Helen Keller, or one of

Annie's orphans, you didn't get cast. And this was when you learned how to run concessions (handling money and managing inventory) and to run a spotlight.

We were made aware of our strengths and our weaknesses. We were taught to respect and take care of our bodies and to be in tune with our emotions and our feelings. At a young age we learned to accept criticism and master rejection.

Our instructors wanted us to be successful, well rounded, adults. In addition to stage skills, they taught us all life skills that many of us have carried into successful adulthood.

"Be kind," to quote Marianne Adams, long-time director of education at Grandstreet, "talent doesn't matter if you are a jerk."

We were very lucky as kids to have fantastic adult role models at Grandstreet, community actors and artists who not only had great talent, but also great character. We had no choice but to treat our elders, and each other, with a great amount of respect. Live theatre is a very vulnerable place and you can't survive up there alone. We had to trust each other.

I grew up in Helena. But I really grew up at Grandstreet Theatre. For many young people, it was a place where we could be ourselves, build self-confidence, and forge relationships that have lasted a lifetime. So many of my Grandstreet peers have gone on to become very successful people, all of whom would attribute their success to the great start they got at Grandstreet.

My new business in Helena, The Hawthorn Bottle Shop and Tasting Room, is a reflection of how the arts have had a significant impact on me in all aspects of my life. The arts nurture creativity. Creativity is a straight shot to innovation.

It's great to come home to Montana and be surrounded by such an extraordinary arts community.

Guidelines available for Artist in Schools and Communities FY16 Grants

Guidelines for the FY16 Artists in Schools and Communities program are now available on the MAC website, www.art.mt.gov, for projects beginning July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016.

The Artists in Schools and Communities program provides matching funds that support a wide range of arts learning experiences and artist residencies for participants of all ages with professional working artists, as well as other special projects that support arts learning in schools and community settings.

The deadline for all grant requests over \$1,500 in the Arts Learning Experience, Artist Residency, and Special Projects categories is **April 6, 2015**. Grant requests over \$1,500 submitted after the April 6 deadline will not be considered.

The deadline for all organizations in the Arts Learning Partner category only will be April 13, 2015.

For complete guidelines, go to www.art.mt.gov. To discuss an idea for a potential arts learning project for your school or community, contact Emily Kohring, director of Arts Education, at 406-444-6522 or ekohring@mt.gov.

Gallery hosts juried art show for elementary students

Throughout the month of April, The Artists' Gallery in the Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture in Bozeman hosts its second annual Children's Art Show. This year's show features 2D and 3D art from the children at Morning Star Elementary in Bozeman. Approximately 55 pieces are chosen from the whole school, grades K-5, for the juried exhibit.

The children's show aims to give young artists an opportunity to experience their own art in a real gallery setting for a full month, complete with their own Art Walk and framing workshops.

Children frequently experience the process of creating art in the classroom with teachers



Owen Hodgson from Longfellow Elementary School proudly displays his work in last year's Children's Art Show.

and guest teachers. Rarely, however, do they get the opportunity to see the other end of the artistic journey and experience the gallery side of art.

Each child's piece is carefully framed and matted in a color and frame selected by the child. Professional artists help the kids put it all together, while stressing the importance of title and presentation.

Several pieces of children's art share panels with one or two "grown-up" artworks from the Artists' Gallery. "This has an interesting effect," notes

overwhelmed. In this show, we noticed that the children actually see the 'grown-up' art more when it is paired with the art of their friends. The result is fascinating and truly exciting."

The first Artists' Gallery elementary-school collaboration was in 2014 with Longfellow Elementary. "The response could not have been more positive," says Kohler. "The students were thrilled to see their work on the gallery walls."

The experience helps them understand the importance of the frame, presentation and titles of their works, and children have an opportunity to explain their art to viewers during the Art Walk.

The Artists' Gallery Children's Art Show hangs throughout April, so that the students can visit their work repeatedly and make sure their relatives and friends see it too.

"It is a wonderful show which brightens all of Bozeman for the non-springy month of April," reports Kohler.

Poetry Out Loud State Finals in Helena March 14

The Montana Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts present the Poetry Out Loud State Finals Saturday, March 14, at Grandstreet Theatre in Helena. Poetry Out Loud is a national recitation competition that encourages high school students to memorize and perform great poems.

This year, more than 80 Montana urban and rural high schools are participating in the Poetry Out Loud program. Each high school holds a school competition, with winners moving on to regional competitions



in Missoula and Butte. Finalists gather in Helena March 14 for the chance to become the state champion.

The Montana Poetry Out Loud champion

wins a trip, along with his or her teacher, to the 10th annual National Poetry Out Loud finals in Washington, DC, April 28-29. Participants also earn the chance to win college scholarships of up to \$20,000, as well as a library of poetry books for his or her school.

The state competition begins at 9 a.m. and is free and open to the public. There will be three rounds of competition, with the final round beginning at approximately 12:45 p.m.

For more information, contact Emily Kohring at the Montana Arts Council, 406-444-6522 or ekohring@mt.gov.